



# Alexandria Times

*Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Before there was a Target at Potomac Yard

*Alexandria Times, August 22, 2019*

*Image: Loudon and Hampshire Railroad, near junction with Alexandria and Washington Railroad. Library of Congress.*

**B**ig box stores and movie theaters have not always been the occupants of Potomac Yard. Long-time residents will remember a railyard there, which was a mainstay of Alexandria starting in 1854. Before that, the railroad and the Alexandria Canal competed as transportation options through the farm known as Preston, which was owned by Mrs. Frances Swann.

The Canal has been discussed in Out of the Attic before, but some interesting facts include that Swann sued the Alexandria Canal Company in 1839 for trespassing on her property. Given that the shareholders of the company were prominent citizens of Alexandria, she requested a change of venue, and was granted her request with its change in venue to Washington County, D.C. The case was eventually decided in Swann's favor by the U.S. Supreme Court, and the Canal Company owed Swann \$6,968.75 plus interest.

In 1854, the Alexandria and Washington Railroad was chartered by the Virginia General Assembly. The center of the railroad's operation was its roundhouse at the southeast intersection of St. Asaph and Princess streets. The railroad's president was a man named James Strange French. A native Virginian, French was a classmate of Edgar Allan Poe at the University of Virginia, and had earned a living as a lawyer, inventor and writer. Perhaps his most significant work was authoring the first biography of the frontiersman Davy Crockett in 1833.

During the Union Occupation of Alexandria in 1862, the Alexandria and Washington Railroad sold at auction to Alexander Hay for \$12,500. Hay promptly renamed the railroad the Washington, Alexandria and Georgetown Railroad, and repaired the line. French tried to regain control of the railroad, but despite an 1867 Military Court of Appeals decision in his favor, he never succeeded.

The Pennsylvania Railroad acquired control of Hay's railroad in 1872. French sold his interest to the Pennsylvania in 1873. In 1888, the Pennsylvania acquired the rights to the old canal bed from Rosslyn to Alexandria.

As a response to the fatal accident on Feb. 19, 1885, in which two trains collided head on due to single tracking, the railroad used the canal bed to lay double tracks. This required the demolition of the aqueduct bridge with dynamite, an event that brought out crowds of Alexandrians at the end of July 1888. The Washington and Alexandria Railroad was absorbed by the Southern Railway Company in 1890.





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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With the planned construction of a Metro station at Potomac Yard, it's nice to have a reminder of the railways that previously occupied the former Preston farm.

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*